



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES  
**Public Health**

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December 11, 2002

TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Jonathan E. Fielding, M.D., M.P.H. *JE Fielding*  
Director of Public Health and Health Officer

James A. Noyes *JAN*  
Director of Public Works

SUBJECT: **DRINKING WATER STUDY BOARD MOTION OF NOVEMBER 12, 2002,  
SYNOPSIS 16**

On November 6, 2002, on motion by Supervisor Antonovich, your Board directed the departments of Health Services and Public Works to review the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) report entitled "*What's on tap? Grading Drinking Water in U.S. Cities*," and to make recommendations. This report responds to the Board order.

The NRDC recently conducted a study of drinking water supplies in 19 cities across the United States. Their report of October 2002, is limited to the Cities of Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Fresno. The report only applies to the City of Los Angeles and not to the Los Angeles County Waterworks Districts or other public water systems within the County of Los Angeles.

The report covers three broad areas: 1) drinking water quality/compliance with national standards, 2) quality of the "right-to-know" reports that water systems are required to send to their customers, and 3) the potential for contamination of lakes, rivers, and underground aquifers that cities use as drinking water sources. The NRDC used grades of excellent, good, fair, and poor to assess drinking water quality/compliance and quality of the right-to-know reports (see attached). For the assessment of drinking water sources, a numeric scoring system was used ranging from 1 (few or no problems) to 6 (serious problems). On drinking water quality and compliance, the City of Los Angeles received a grade of "fair." For the quality of its "right-to-know" reports, the City of Los Angeles received a grade of "good." In reviewing the potential for contamination of the City of Los Angeles drinking water sources, the NRDC assigned the City of Los Angeles scores of 5 and 3, respectively, for its imported and groundwater sources.

It is important to note that these grades are based on criteria that are stricter than national standards and do not clearly relate to adverse health effects. The City of Los Angeles drinking water quality/compliance was graded fair, despite the fact that they are in compliance with all federal and State drinking water standards. The adverse health impacts associated with drinking water contaminants below these standards represent risks that are extremely small.

For example, the City of Los Angeles was given a lower quality/compliance grade by the NRDC because their arsenic levels averaged approximately 4 parts per billion (ppb) in some areas. To put this level in proper perspective, the federal standard for arsenic was recently lowered from 50 ppb to 10 ppb after a careful assessment of the research literature on health risks associated with arsenic exposures. As part of this analysis, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimated that the change from 50 ppb to 10 ppb will cost approximately \$181 million in total annualized costs. The reduction will prevent approximately 19-31 cases of bladder cancer and 19-25 cases of lung cancer each year in the United States. Based on these numbers, the projected health benefit (i.e., cases of cancer prevented) of reducing arsenic to below 4 ppb throughout Los Angeles County would be minimal and would cost millions of dollars.

The report also states that "elevated levels of cancer-causing by-products of disinfection were found in the water in parts of the City of Los Angeles." However, the concentrations remain below federal standards and local efforts are underway to further reduce the levels. Epidemiologic studies of these disinfection by-products suggest that they account for a very small, if any, percentage of cancer cases in this County.

A further limitation of the NRDC analysis is that it treats contaminants (e.g., nitrates and radon) in water from individual wells as representative of the quality of water provided to users. In actuality, because water that the consumer receives at the tap comes from multiple treated sources, the level of contaminants in this "blended" water does not present a health risk.

Primary responsibility for the protection of the water quality of the waters of the State rests with the State Water Resources Control Board, together with nine Regional Water Quality Control Boards. California water quality must meet standards promulgated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The State Department of Health Services also shares responsibility for water quality and can promulgate standards that are more restrictive than the EPA.

In conclusion, we do not believe any County action is indicated at this time. If you have any questions or need additional information, please let us know.

EH:nm  
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Attachment

c: Chief Administrative Officer  
County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors